

The Attraction of the Center

"Centrism" is the tendency to see two different beliefs and attempt to split the difference between them. The reason why it's a bad idea should be obvious: truth is independent of our beliefs, no less than any other partisans, centrists ignore evidence in favor of their predetermined ideology.

So what's the attraction? First, it requires little thought: arguing for a specific position requires collecting evidence and arguing for it. Centrism, simply requires repeating some of what A is saying and some of what B is saying and mixing them together. Centrists often don't even seem to care if the bits they take contradict each other.

Second, it's somewhat inoffensive. Taking a strong stand on A or B will unavoidably alienate some. But being a centrist, one can still maintain friends on both sides, since they will find at least some things that you espouse to be agreeable with their own philosophies.

Third, it makes it easier to suck up to those in charge, because the concept of the "center" can easily move along with shifts in power. A staunch conservative will have to undergo a major change of political philosophy to get a place in liberal administration. A centrist can simply espouse a few more positions from the conservatives and a few less from the liberals and fit in just fine. This criteria explains why centrists are so prevalent in the pundit class (neither administration is tempted to really force them out) and why so many "centrist" pundits espouse mostly conservative ideas these days (the conservatives are in power).

Fourth, despite actually being a servant of those in power, centrism gives one the illusion of actually being a serious, independent thinker. "People on the right and on the left already know what they're going to say on every issue," they might claim, "but we centrists make decisions based on the situation." (This excuse was recently used in a fundraising letter by *The New Republic*.) Of course, the "situation" that's used to make these decisions is simply who's currently in power, as discussed above, but that part is carefully omitted.

Fifth, it appeals to the public. There's tremendous dissatisfaction among the public with the government and our system of politics. Despite being precisely in the middle of this corrupt system, centrists can claim that they're actually "independents" and "disagree with both the left and the right". They can denounce "extremism" (which isn't very popular) and play the "moderate", even when their positions are extremely far from what the public believes or what the facts say.

Together, these reasons combine to make centrism an especially attractive place to be in American politics. But the disease is far from limited to politics. Journalists frequently suggest the truth lies between the two opposing sources they've quoted. Academics try to distance themselves from policy positions proposed by either party. And, perhaps worst of all, scientists try to split the difference between two competing theories.

Unfortunately for them, neither the truth nor the public necessarily lies somewhere in the middle. Fortunately for them, more valuable rewards do.

Exercise for the reader: What's the attraction of "contrarianism", the ideology subscribed to by online magazines like *Slate*?

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July 12, 2006